County Libraries To Get Free Parking

By TIM CRAIG
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The Montgomery County Council approved a measure yesterday that supporters say gives motorists one less excuse for not going to a library.

In a 6 to 2 vote, the council agreed to have taxpayers pick up the parking tab for people who visit county libraries.

"If we do not see libraries as part of our free education system, we have a problem," said council member Michael L. Subin (D-At Large), who supported the proposal. "Libraries have been free since the time of Ben Franklin."

Council members said they aren't sure how much the policy would cost taxpayers, but early estimates suggest it could be nearly $1 million a year.

The county's proposed operating budget for next year is about $3.9 billion. Even with the county expecting to end the fiscal year with a surplus of $300 million, some critics of the library proposal called it a luxury taxpayers can't afford.

Montgomery Officials Vote for Free Library Parking

"This is an example of spending that is unnecessary," council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) said at the meeting. Leventhal argued that people who take public transportation to a library still have to pay fares.

"You could argue this is inequitable to people who ride transit," he said after the meeting.

Parking at libraries is generally free across suburban Washington, including the 21 branches in Fairfax County and the 18 in Prince George's County. In Montgomery, where more than a half-million people hold library cards, parking is free at all but one library, the Bethesda branch, where the county charges 50 cents an hour.

But county leaders are seeking to build new libraries in pedestrian-friendly city centers where parking is limited. The county had drawn up plans to charge for parking at new libraries in Rockville, Silver Spring and Shady Grove.

In Rockville, the county is building a $26 million central library in the new Rockville Town Square, which will also include retail space and condominiums. The City of Rockville and the county, state and federal governments, along with Rockville developer Federal Realty Investment Trust, are building the 12.5-acre project.

Under the agreement, the county is paying for the library construction, but Rockville has issued $34 million in bonds to build three public garages to serve the library and the rest of Town Square.

Rockville officials had planned to charge $1 an hour during the day on weekdays to park at the garages.

"If someone is in a library 10 hours a week, that adds up," said council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg), sponsor of the council bill, which also had the support of County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D).

To implement the policy, the county may have to reimburse Rockville up to a half-million dollars annually, county officials said. The county might also need to hire garage attendants in Bethesda, at a cost of as much as $400,000 a year, to monitor the lot and ensure that people who park for free actually go into the library, analysts who work for the council said.

Marilyn Praisner (D-Eastern County), who voted against the bill, said the new policy runs counter to planners' vision to make Montgomery a more urban county, where residents are encouraged take public transportation.

"If I were going downtown to the Library of Congress, I would in all likelihood have to pay for parking," Praisner said. "The question of a free library is a question of a fee to enter the building, not a question of how the person got there."